

Classic Poetry Series

Frederic Manning
- poems -

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Frederic Manning(22 July 1882 – 22 February 1935)

Frederic Manning was an Australian poet and novelist.

Biography

Born in Sydney, Manning was the son (one of eight children) of local politician Sir William Patrick Manning. His family were Catholics, of Irish origin. A sickly child (asthma), Manning was educated exclusively at home. As a teenager he formed a close friendship with Arthur Galton, a scholarly man who was Secretary to the Governor of New South Wales. Galton went home to England in 1898, taking Manning with him, but Manning returned to Australia in 1900. In 1903, he finally settled in the UK.

Early years in England

Manning moved in with Galton, who had become the Vicar of Edenham, a village about three miles north-west of Bourne in south Lincolnshire. He devoted his time to study, reading voraciously, particularly the classics and philosophy, under the domineering influence of Galton. Although he seemingly shared Galton's contempt for Catholicism, Manning never renounced it entirely. He made several unsuccessful attempts to write a historical novel. In 1907, Manning published his first book *The Vigil of Brunhild*, which was a monologue written in verse. *Scenes and Portraits* followed in 1909, which was a discussion of religious topics written up in the form of a series of debates in which those taking part are leading lights from the past, such as Socrates, St. Francis and Thomas Cromwell. These books went down well in literary circles, but did not enjoy a particularly wide circulation. Manning was recognised as an up-and-coming writer, a reputation that the indifferent collection *Poems* (1910) did not dissipate.

Manning was never the most robust of individuals, neither was his lifestyle particularly healthy. Despite his asthma, he became a heavy smoker, and he seems to have sought escape from his loneliness in the local public houses. In the years immediately before World War I, he started to move in London artistic circles, becoming friends with Max Beerbohm and William Rothenstein (there is a collection of letters from Manning to Rothenstein) and also the influential young poets [Ezra Pound](http://www.poemhunter.com/ezra-pound/) and [Richard Aldington](http://www.poemhunter.com/richard-aldington/).

First World War

When war broke out, Manning was keen to enlist, possibly to escape from a stifling environment and to widen his horizons. A man with his fragile constitution and unhealthy lifestyle was not going to be an attractive proposition for the military authorities, but in October 1915 after several attempts, his persistence paid off and he finally enrolled in the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. He was given the number Private 19022. He was selected for officer training, but failed the course. Sent to France in 1916, Manning experienced action with the 7th Battalion at the Battle of the Somme, was promoted to lance-corporal and soaked up the experience of life in the trenches. He was recalled for further training and posted to Ireland in May 1917 with a commission as a second lieutenant in the Royal Irish Regiment. The life of an officer did not agree with him, he seems not to have integrated particularly well, he drank excessively, getting into trouble with his superiors. Doubtless the vivid memories of recent combat were having their effect upon his behaviour too. The inebriation was put down to neurasthenia, but Manning resigned his commission on 28 February 1918.

Later career

Manning continued to write. In 1917 he published a collection of poems under the title *Ediola*. This was a mixture of verse predominantly in his former style alongside war poems heavily influenced by the imagism of Pound, which deal introspectively with personal aims and ideals tempered in the crucible of battle. He contributed to anthologies, for example, *The Monthly Chapbook* which appeared in July 1919 edited by Harold Monro, containing twenty-three poems by writers including John Alford, Herbert Read, Walter De La Mare, Osbert Sitwell, Siegfried Sassoon, D.H. Lawrence, Edith Sitwell, Robert Nichols, Rose Macaulay and William Henry Davies alongside Manning and Aldington. He wrote for periodicals, including *Criterion*, which was produced by T.S. Eliot.

Poetry did not pay, and so in 1923 Manning took a commission from his publisher

John Murray to write *The Life of Sir William White*, which was a thorough, workmanlike and deadly dull biography of the man who, as Director of Naval Construction, led the build-up of the Royal Navy in the last years of the nineteenth century. Galton had died in 1921, which not only left Manning effectively homeless, but also lacking a forceful directing influence in his life. He lived for much of the time at the Bull Hotel in Bourne, apart from a short spell when he owned a farmhouse in Surrey. At this time he was friendly with T. E. Lawrence, then serving in the RAF at Cranwell, some twenty miles (a motorcycle ride) from where Manning was living. In 1926 he contributed the introduction to an edition of *Epicurus's Morals: Collected and faithfully Englished* by Walter Charleton, originally published in 1656, published in a limited edition by Peter Davies.

The Middle Parts of Fortune

As the 1920s progressed and confidence started to return, the artistic community was increasingly looking back at the war. The demand for written material started to grow. The big catalyst was the play *Journey's End* written by R. C. Sherriff which first appeared in 1928. Davies urged Manning to use his undoubted talent in conjunction with his intense wartime experiences to write a novel. In an effort to capture the moment, Manning had to work rapidly, with little opportunity for second drafts and revisions. The result was *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, published anonymously by Peter Davies in a limited numbered edition of about 500 in 1929, copies of which are now rare collectors' items. The book is an account in the vernacular of the lives of ordinary soldiers. The central character named Bourne is the filter through which Manning's own experiences are transposed into the lives of a group of men whose own personal qualities interact in response to conflict and comradeship. Bourne is an enigmatic, detached character (a self-portrait of the author) who does not survive to the end, but leaves each of the protagonists alone with their own detachment, privy to their own thoughts.

This was a potent brew, forcibly written, too forcibly for what were seen as the sensibilities of the contemporary readership. An expurgated version was published by Davies in 1930 under the title *Her Privates We*. There is a quote from Shakespeare at the start of each chapter, and this particular reference occurs in *Hamlet*. In Act 2, Scene 2, there is a jocular exchange between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

</i>Guildenstern: On Fortune's cap we are not the very button.

Hamlet: Nor the soles of her shoe?

Rosencrantz: Neither, my lord.

Hamlet: Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours?

Guildenstern: Faith, her privates we.

Hamlet: In the secret parts of fortune? O, most true; she is a strumpet.

There is quite clearly a sexual connotation, a negative one, albeit subtle. The original publication of this edition credited authorship to "Private 19022", possibly a simple desire for anonymity or possibly a further pun on "private soldier" and "private parts". Manning was first credited with authorship by name posthumously in 1943, but the original text was published widely only in 1977. Amongst the voices raised in praise were those of Arnold Bennett, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound (who cited Manning as a literary mentor) and T. E. Lawrence, who claimed to have seen through the anonymity and recognised the author of *Scenes and Portraits*. Be that as it may, *Scenes and Portraits* was re-published by Peter Davies in 1930, and Manning lived out his life basking in the afterglow of what is widely regarded as one of the very finest novels based upon the experiences of warfare.

Later life

Frederic Manning never married. His biographers suggest he eschewed intimacy, and that his long-time host Galton and the hostesses of the literary salons which he visited should be seen as "parent-substitute" figures. Like his hero Bourne, Manning was a private person, who kept his own counsel. Manning died of respiratory diseases at a Hampstead nursing home. His obituary appeared in *The Times* on 26 February 1935. He is interred at Kensal Green cemetery.

At Even

Hush ye! Hush ye! My babe is sleeping.
Hush, ye winds, that are full of sorrow!
Hush, ye rains, from your weary weeping!
Give him slumber until to-morrow.

Hush ye, yet! In the years hereafter,
Surely sorrow is all his reaping;
Tears shall be in the place of laughter,
Give him peace for a while in sleeping.

Hush ye, hush! he is weak and ailing:
Send his mother his share of weeping.
Hush ye, winds, from your endless wailing;
Hush ye, hush ye, my babe is sleeping!

Frederic Manning

Grotesque

These are the damned circles Dante trod,
Terrible in hopelessness,
But even skulls have their humour,
An eyeless and sardonic mockery:
And we,
Sitting with streaming eyes in the acrid smoke,
That murks our foul, damp billet,
Chant bitterly, with raucous voices
As a choir of frogs
In hideous irony, our patriotic songs.

Frederic Manning

Kore

Yea, she hath passed hereby, and blessed the sheaves,
And the great garths, and stacks, and quiet farms,
And all the tawny, and the crimson leaves.
Yea, she hath passed with poppies in her arms,
Under the star of dusk, through stealing mist,
And blessed the earth, and gone, while no man wist.

With slow, reluctant feet, and weary eyes,
And eye-lids heavy with the coming sleep,
With small breasts lifted up in stress of sighs,
She passed, as shadows pass, among the sheep;
While the earth dreamed, and only I was ware
Of that faint fragrance blown from her soft hair.

The land lay steeped in peace of silent dreams;
There was no sound amid the sacred boughs.
Nor any mournful music in her streams:
Only I saw the shadow on her brows,
Only I knew her for the yearly slain,
And wept, and weep until she come again.

Frederic Manning

Leaves

A frail and tenuous mist lingers on baffled and intricate branches;
Little gilt leaves are still, for quietness holds every bough;
Pools in the muddy road slumber, reflecting indifferent stars;
Steeped in the loveliness of moonlight is earth, and the valleys,
Brimmed up with quiet shadow, with a mist of sleep.

But afar on the horizon rise great pulses of light,
The hammering of guns, wrestling, locked in conflict
Like brute, stone gods of old struggling confusedly;
Then overhead purrs a shell, and our heavies
Answer, with sudden clapping bruits of sound,
Loosening our shells that stream whining and whimpering precipitately,
Hounding through air athirst for blood.

And the little gilt leaves
Flicker in falling, like waifs and flakes of flame.

Frederic Manning

The Sign

We are here in a wood of little beeches:
And the leaves are like black lace
Against a sky of nacre.

One bough of clear promise
Across the moon.

It is in this wise that God speaketh unto me.
He layeth hands of healing upon my flesh,
Stilling it in an eternal peace,
Until my soul reaches out myriad and infinite hands
Toward him,
And is eased of its hunger.

And I know that this passes:
This implacable fury and torment of men,
As a thing insensate and vain:
And the stillness hath said unto me,
Over the tumult of sounds and shaken flame,
Out of the terrible beauty of wrath,
I alone am eternal.

One bough of clear promise
Across the moon

Frederic Manning

The Trenches

Endless lanes sunken in the clay,
Bays, and traverses, fringed with wasted herbage,
Seed-pods of blue scabious, and some lingering blooms;
And the sky, seen as from a well,
Brilliant with frosty stars.
We stumble, cursing, on the slippery duck-boards.
Goaded like the damned by some invisible wrath,
A will stronger than weariness, stronger than animal fear,
Implacable and monotonous.

Here a shaft, slanting, and below
A dusty and flickering light from one feeble candle
And prone figures sleeping uneasily,
Murmuring,
And men who cannot sleep,
With faces impassive as masks,
Bright, feverish eyes, and drawn lips,
Sad, pitiless, terrible faces,
Each an incarnate curse.

Here in a bay, a helmeted sentry
Silent and motionless, watching while two sleep,
And he sees before him
With indifferent eyes the blasted and torn land
Peopled with stiff prone forms, stupidly rigid,
As tho' they had not been men.

Dead are the lips where love laughed or sang,
The hands of youth eager to lay hold of life,
Eyes that have laughed to eyes,
And these were begotten,
O Love, and lived lightly, and burnt
With the lust of a man's first strength: ere they were rent,
Almost at unawares, savagely; and strewn
In bloody fragments, to be the carrion
Of rats and crows.

And the sentry moves not, searching
Night for menace with weary eyes.

Frederic Manning